

George Gershwin - American Arts Issue
Composer of "Porgy & Bess"
Scott #1484
Issued February 28, 1973 in Beverly Hills, CA
Designed by Mark English

George Gershwin was born on September 26, 1898 in Brooklyn, New York. His original name was Jacob Gershwin and he was one of the most significant and popular American composers of all time. He wrote primarily for the Broadway musical theatre, but important as well are his orchestral and piano compositions in which he blended, in varying degrees, the techniques and forms of classical music with the stylistic nuances and techniques of popular music and jazz. George Gershwin died on July 11, 1937 in Hollywood California.

Gershwin's most enduring and respected Broadway work, *Porgy and Bess*, was lukewarmly received upon its premiere in 1935. Gershwin's "American Folk Opera" was inspired by the DuBose Heyward novel *Porgy* and featured a libretto and lyrics by Ira and the husband-wife team of DuBose and Dorothy Heyward.

In preparation for the show, Gershwin spent time in the rural South, studying firsthand the music and lifestyle of impoverished African Americans. Theatre critics received the premiere production enthusiastically, but highbrow music critics were derisive, distressed that "lowly" popular music should be incorporated into an opera structure. Black audiences throughout the years have criticized the work for its condescending depiction of stereotyped characters and for Gershwin's inauthentic appropriation of black musical forms. Nevertheless, Gershwin's music—including such standards as "Summertime," "It Ain't Necessarily So," "Bess, You Is My Woman Now," and "I Got Plenty O' Nuttin'"—transcended early criticism to attain a revered niche in the musical world, largely because it successfully amalgamates various musical cultures to evoke something uniquely American and wholly Gershwin.

Porgy and Bess received overdue recognition in the years 1952 to 1954 when the U.S. State Department selected it to represent the United States on an international tour, during which it became the first opera by an American composer to be performed at the La Scala opera house in Milan.

While it still raises political issues, contemporary attitudes towards the work are reflected in a statement by Grace Bumbry, who portrayed Bess in the Metropolitan Opera's widely praised revival in 1985. Grace stated, *"I resented the role at first, possibly because I really didn't know the score, and I think because of the racial aspect. I thought it beneath me. I felt I had worked far too hard, that we had come to far to regress to 1935. My way of dealing with it was to see that it really was a piece of Americana, of American history. Many now consider the score from Porgy and Bess to be Gershwin's greatest masterpiece."*

Source:
Encyclopedia Africana

